



DANIEL HUDON

Eulogies for Lost Species

THE BUBAL HARTEBEEST

Alcelaphus buselaphus buselaphus

Though the Bubal Hartebeest carried its huge beam head as stylishly as possible, its melancholy eyes, humped shoulders, sloping quarters, and particularly its long, long face gave the antelope a deprecatory appearance, as if it were apologizing for its very existence. Meekness was its virtue. Its small horns strikingly outlined the shape of a lyre though from the side their lazy curves made it seem like a pair of egrets had taken root and spent their time gazing hopelessly skyward.

The Bubal Hartebeest moved at a smooth and swinging canter, flicking its rear legs fleetly as it ran with great endurance over the lowland mountains of Northern Africa. Chased, it easily fled its pursuers and, perhaps contrite, would often stop and stare its foe full in the face with a most humble look, as if it didn't mean to escape, as if it couldn't help itself. Then, with a violent sneeze, once more it would bolt ahead.

THE BLACK MAMO

Drepanis funerea

Deep in the tubes of the lobelia flowers hid the nectar that was perpetually sought by the Black Mamo, a honeycreeper that was black from head to foot except for a small patch of yellow at the base of its absurdly long, curved bill. After foraging from flower to flower, spending only a few seconds at

each, dipping in deep, rapidly darting their tongues in and out so they appeared like a liquid streak, their heads would emerge whimsically encrusted in pollen. Then they would sit quietly preening their feathers, stretching their necks this way and that, trying to reach the foreparts of their bodies with their long bills but never able to reach the tops of their heads.

Named *funerea* for its somber plumage and the sad fate that probably awaited it, the Black Mamo was tame and inquisitive, often approaching observers out of curiosity and perching overhead. Its song was a single long plaintive note.

Only described on Molokai in 1893; the last one was shot in 1907. Here's a first-hand description of one of the last Black Mamos by zoologist William Bryan:

Actively hopping and flirting from limb to limb scarcely stopping a second, eyeing me sharply all the while... Without further delay I availed myself of the first opportunity... and fired. The feathers flew.

THE ILIN ISLAND CLOUDRUNNER

Crateromys paulus

Imagine the Ilin Island Cloudbunner creeping among the branches of the pine and oak trees that used to grow among the clouds of its island home, its padded feet adapted to arboreal life, flicking its bushy tricolored tail, stopping now and then to gather fruit and leaves in its large foreclaws, sitting upright to eat and, oblivious to any consequent danger, chewing its food loudly.



THE LESSER BILBY

Macrotis leucura

The bilby lived in the harsh desert of central Australia and only came out at night. During the day, it hid deep in its deep spiral burrow and slept in a sitting position: squatting on its hind legs, it tucked in its long muzzle, folded its long, rabbit-like ears over its eyes, and sank into sleep.

Unlike the docile greater bilby, the lesser bilby was ill-tempered and once described as “fierce and intractable, and repulsed the most tactful attempts to handle them by repeated savage snapping bites and harsh hissing sounds.” It grew to rabbit size and was hunted for its smooth, silky fur.

Widely dispersed and never abundant, on nights of strong winds, heavy rains or a full moon, the lesser bilby stayed hidden in its burrow.

THE JAPANESE RIVER OTTER

Lutra lutra whiteleyi

In the country of rich reed beds, on the island of many dragonflies, otters romped in the rivers like children at play. How many there were no one knew. Their dark coats slick with wetness, a long thick serpentine tail, they were part of the rivers, like the herons and egrets, swimming with their noses in the air, eyes squinting, chasing each other in made-up games of tag and hide ‘n seek on the banks and in the water, wrestling. When they were hungry they plunged into the water and came up with a fish that they ate greedily, leaving the remains on the banks like a sacrifice. Lithe and palpable in the pool of the moment, the water didn’t splash when they dove in. ■

DH writes: When we think of recently extinct species today, most of us think of the dodo or perhaps the passenger pigeon. However, in the last five centuries we have lost more than 900 known species, across all branches of the tree of life, primarily through habitat loss and destruction and through over-exploitation and the introduction of invasive species. As artist Todd McGrain has said, forgetting is another kind of extinction, so these brief eulogies are written to celebrate the species we have recently lost in the hopes that they won't be forgotten.

Notes

The Bubal hartebeest, also known as the bubal antelope, was hunted to extinction in 1954.

Despite the described hunting story, the black mammo was driven to extinction in Hawaii by habitat destruction, introduced rats and mosquito-borne diseases. Quote from Julian Hume's *Extinct Birds*, Poyser Monographs, 2012.

The Ilin Island cloudrunner, extinct due to habitat destruction, was last seen in 1953 on Ilin Island in the Philippines.

The lesser bilby suffered from introduced foreign predators like the fox and domestic cat. It was last seen in the 1950s, or possibly the 1960s.

Once numbering in the millions, the Japanese river otter was overhunted for its fur and also suffered as its river habitat became polluted and urbanized. The last official sighting was in 1979.